

When the Gods Laughed Across a Sea of Orchids

STUART WALKER'S Portmanteau season at the Punch and Judy Theatre is in full swing. The one long play of the bill is Lord Dunsany's piece, "The Laughter of the Gods." It is a thing of atmosphere, consummately achieved, of thrills and chills and passages of supreme beauty. The plot is typical. Two ladies, Tharmia, wife of Ichtharion and Arolind, wife of Ludibras, tearfully plead with their husbands to persuade the King to return to his palace in Barbul-el-Sharnak and leave the jungle city of Thek, where the court is now stationed, and where the ladies have discovered they cannot buy any new hair, or even any gold dust to put on the hair they brought with them out of the centre of the world. Ichtharion and Ludibras coerce a prophet, known here as Voice-of-the-Gods, and he finally agrees to prophesy that the gods will overthrow Thek if it is not evacuated by every living soul within three days. The King is not particularly moved by this prophecy. In fact, all save the Queen are skeptical. It is decreed that the prophet shall die at sundown of the third day if the prophecy proves false. We pick up the dialogue about the middle of the last act and carry it through to the final curtain.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS
I wish to die.

ICHTHARION
No, no, we will pray the King to pardon you.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS
I wish to die.

LUDIBRAS
No, no.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS
Because of me the holy gods have lied; they that have spoken sooth through a thousand prophets. Because of me they have lied. They will be proudly silent for evermore and inspire no prophet again, and the nations will wander blindly and fall unwarned to their doom, or stray away and be lost in unchronicled time. Or though they should speak again yet how shall Man believe them? I have brought a bane upon the generations that have not yet known the world.

ICHTHARION
No, no. Do not say that.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS
And my name shall be a curse upon the lips of many nations crowding to their doom.

ICHTHARION
Do not be unhappy. All men must die, but to die unhappy. . . .

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS
I have betrayed the gods who spake by me!

ICHTHARION
Do not be unhappy.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS
I say to you that I have betrayed the gods.

ICHTHARION
Listen to me. Do not be so unhappy. There are no gods. Everybody knows that there are no gods. The King knows it.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS
You have heard their Prophet lie and believe that the gods are dead.

LUDIBRAS
There are indeed no gods. It is well known.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS
There are gods, and they have a vengeance even for you. Listen and I will tell you what it shall be. Aye and for you also. . . . Listen! . . . No, no, they are silent in the gloom of the hills. They have not spoken to me since I lied.

ICHTHARION
You are right; the gods will punish us. It is natural that they should not speak just now, but they will certainly punish us. It is not therefore necessary for any man to avenge himself upon us, even though there were any cause.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS
It is not necessary.

ICHTHARION
Indeed, it might even further anger the gods if a man should be before them to punish us.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS
The gods are very swift; no man outruns them.

LUDIBRAS
A man would be rash to attempt to.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS
The sun is falling low. I will leave you now, for I have ever loved the sun at evening. I go to watch it drop through the gilded clouds, and make a wonder of familiar things. After the sunset, night, and after an evil deed, the vengeance of the gods.

LUDIBRAS
[Exit R.]

ICHTHARION
He really believes in the gods.

ICHTHARION
He is as mad as the Queen; we must humor his madness if we ever see him more. I think that all will be well.

[An executioner steals after the Prophet; he is dressed in crimson satin to the knees; he wears a leather belt and carries the axe of his trade.]

LUDIBRAS
His voice was angry as he went away. I fear he may yet betray us.

ICHTHARION
It is not likely. He thinks that the gods will punish us.

LUDIBRAS
How long will he think so? The Queen's fancies change thrice an hour.

ICHTHARION
The executioner keeps very close to him now. He comes closer every hour. There is not much time for him to change his fancies.

LUDIBRAS
He has the will to betray us if that fancy leaves him.

ICHTHARION
The executioner is very eager for him. He invented a new stroke lately, but he has not had a man since we came to Thek.

LUDIBRAS
I do not like an eager executioner—the King sees him and it makes him think.

ICHTHARION
Look how low the sun is; he has no



A scene from "The Laughter of the Gods" at the Punch and Judy Theatre. Lord Dunsany, Captain in the 1st Battalion Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers.

time to betray us. The King is not yet here.

LUDIBRAS
He is coming.

ICHTHARION
But the Prophet is not here.

LUDIBRAS
No, he is not yet come.

[Enter the King.]

KING KARNOS
The Queen's maidens have persuaded her that there is nothing to fear. They are quite excellent; they shall dance before me. The Queen will sleep; they are quite excellent. Ah, Ichtharion! Come to me, Ichtharion.

LUDIBRAS
Why does the King send for you?

KING KARNOS
You were wrong, Ichtharion.

ICHTHARION
Your Majesty!

[Ludibras watches.]

KING KARNOS
You were wrong to think that Thek is not very lovely.

ICHTHARION
Yes, I was wrong and I am much to blame.

KING KARNOS
Yes, it is very beautiful at evening. I will watch the sun go down over the orchids. I will never see Barbul-el-Sharnak any more. I will sit and watch the sun go down on the orchids till it is gone and all their colors fade.

ICHTHARION
It is very beautiful now. How still it is! I have never seen so still a sunset before.

KING KARNOS
It is like a picture done by a dying painter, full of a beautiful color. Even if

all these orchids died to-night yet their beauty is an indestructible memory.

LUDIBRAS
[Aside to Ichtharion.] The Prophet is coming this way.

ICHTHARION
Your Majesty, the Prophet walks about the palace, and the executioner is close behind him. If the Queen saw him and the executioner would it not trouble her? Were it not better that he be killed at once? Shall I whistle now to the executioner?

KING KARNOS
Not now. I said at sunset.

ICHTHARION
Your Majesty, it is merciful to kill a man before the set of sun. For it is natural in a man to love the sun. But to see it set and to know that it will not come again is even a second death. It would be merciful to kill him now.

KING KARNOS
I have said at sunset. It were unjust to kill him before his prophecy is proven false.

ICHTHARION
But, your Majesty, we know that it is false. He also knows it.

KING KARNOS
He shall die at sunset.

LUDIBRAS
Your Majesty, the Prophet will pray for life if he is not killed now. It would be a pity to grant it.

KING KARNOS
Is not a king's word death? I have said he shall die at sunset.

[Enter Prophet. The Executioner creeps along close behind him.]

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS
O the gods are about to have lied. The gods will have lied. I have prophesied



falsely and the gods will have lied. My death cannot atone for it nor the punishment of others.

[Ichtharion and Ludibras start.]

ICHTHARION
He will betray us yet.

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS
O why did you let your voice come through my lips? Oh why did you allow your voice to lie? For centuries it has been said from city to city "The gods cannot lie." The nomads have known it out upon the plains. The mountaineers have known it near the dawn. That is all over now. O King, let me die at once. For I have prophesied falsely and at sunset the gods will lie.

KING KARNOS
It is not sunset yet. No doubt you have spoken truly.

[Enter Queen.]

How well the Queen looks. Her maidens are quite excellent.

LUDIBRAS
[To Ichtharion.] There is something a little dreadful in

seeing the Queen so calm. She is like a windless sunset in the winter before a hurricane comes and the snow swirls up before it over the world.

ICHTHARION
I do not like calm sunsets; they make me think that something is going to happen. Yes, the Queen is very quiet; she will sleep to-night.

QUEEN
I am not frightened any longer. All the wild fancies of my brain have left it. I have often troubled you with little fears. Now they are all at rest and I am afraid no longer.

KING KARNOS
That is good; I am very glad. You will sleep to-night.

QUEEN
Sleep. Why—yes, I shall sleep. O yes, we shall all sleep.

KING KARNOS
Your maidens have told you that there is nothing to fear.

QUEEN
Nothing to fear? No, no more little fears to trouble me.

KING KARNOS
They have told you there is nothing at all to fear. Indeed there is nothing.

QUEEN
No more little fears. There is one great fear.

KING KARNOS
A great fear! Why, what is it?

QUEEN
I must not say. For you have often soothed me when I was frightened, and it were not well for me to trouble you at the last.

KING KARNOS
What is your fear? Shall I send again for your maidens?

QUEEN
No, it is not my fear. It is all men's fear if they knew.

KING KARNOS
[Glancing round.] Ah, you have seen my man in red. I will send him away. I will.

QUEEN
No, no. My fear is not earthly. I am not afraid of little things any more.

KING KARNOS
Why, what is it then?

QUEEN
I do not quite know. But you know how I have ever feared the gods. The gods are going to do some dreadful thing.

KING KARNOS
Believe me, the gods do nothing nowadays.

QUEEN
You have indeed been very good to me. It seems a little while since the camels came to Argun-Zeerith by the iris marshes, the camels with the gold-hung palanquin, and the bells above their heads, high up in air, the silver bridal bells. It seems a very little while ago. I did not know how swift the end would come.

KING KARNOS
What end? To whom is the end coming?

QUEEN
Do not be troubled. We should not let Fate trouble us. The World and its daily cares, ah, they are frightful; but Fate—I smile at Fate. Fate cannot hurt us if we smile at it.

KING KARNOS
What end do you say is coming?

QUEEN
I do not know. Something that has been shall soon be no more.

KING KARNOS
No, no. Look upon Thek. It is built of rock and our palace is all of marble. Time has not scratched it with six centuries. Six tearing centuries with all their claws. We are throned on gold and founded upon marble. Death will some day find me, indeed, but I am young. Sire after sire of mine has died in Barbul-el-Sharnak or in Thek, but has left our dynasty laughing sheer in the face of Time from over these age-old walls.

QUEEN
Say farewell to me now, lest something happen.

KING KARNOS
No, no, we will not say unhappy things.

EXECUTIONER
The sun has set.

KING KARNOS
Net yet. The jungle hides it. It is not yet set. Look at the beautiful light upon the orchids. For how long they have flashed their purple on the gleaming walls of Thek. For how long they will flash there on our immortal palace, immortal in marble and immortal in song. Ah, how the color changes. [To the Executioner.] The sun is set. Take him away. [To the Queen.] It is he whose end you foresaw. [The Executioner grips the Prophet by the arm.]

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS
The gods have lied!

KING KARNOS
The jungle is sinking! It has fallen into the earth!

[The Queen smiles a little, holding his hand.]

The city is falling in! The houses are rolling toward us!

[Thunder off.]

ICHTHARION
They are coming up like a wave and a darkness is coming with them.

[Loud and prolonged thunder. Flashes of red light and then total darkness. A little light comes back, showing recumbent figures, shattered pillars and rocks of white marble. The Prophet's back is broken, but he raises the forepart of his body for a moment.]

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS
[Triumphantly.] They have not lied!

ICHTHARION
O, I am killed.

[Laughter heard off.]

Some one is laughing. Laughing even in Thek! Why, the whole city is shattered. [The laughter grows demonic.]

What is that dreadful sound?

VOICE-OF-THE-GODS
It is the laughter of the gods that cannot lie, going back to their hills.

[He dies.]

THE AGONY OF FRIEDRICH WECKEL—By Pierre Mille

Translated By William L. McPherson

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IT WAS Marlis, the surgeon major with two stripes, won by three years' service on the Alsace front, who told me what I am going to tell you. I shall try to reproduce his own words, without adding anything to them. "I have no need to describe to you what this war has been on the summits of the Vosges, at an altitude of 1,000 feet, and what it will be soon, when we descend into the valley of the Rhine. I suppose you know that we fought in the woods, in the cold and the snow. In four years we advanced hardly half a kilometre, and were never driven back more than that. Nowhere, save at certain points on the Verdun front and near Arras in 1915, were the trenches so close. From the two sides of a little valley, about as big as a handkerchief, the opposing forces sniped and spied.

"I was there, at N—, with a battalion of Alpines, in a little hospital, three-quarters sunk into the ground, roofed over with trunks of trees, on which a covering of earth was spread. Every day they brought me two or three men, usually wounded by shell fire, rarely by bullets.

"One morning—or, rather, one night, for the fighting there is generally done before dawn—the Boches made an attack. They succeeded in clearing the trough of the valley. They cut our first line of barbed wire and got a footing on the slope. But they were driven back by our rifle and machine gun fire to their starting point, and lost many men.

"They left a wounded man suspended in our barbed wire entanglements—a poor devil of a private soldier, who cried out despairingly, sometimes in German, sometimes in excellent French without an accent. This led me to believe that he was a student, or some sort of intellectual. And he was very young. One

didn't need a pair of glasses to distinguish that; he was so close to us.

"I thought at first that his company would come to look for him. If he had been an officer or even a feldwebel, I am persuaded that they would have done so, under orders. We should have interposed no obstacle, for his cries cut us to the quick. But he was only a private, without stripes—human material—and the Boche command cares for its human material only as you care for your money. They want to spend it to the best advantage. They made this calculation, I imagine: 'If we attempt to rescue him the French will fire on us. We shall lose three or four men trying to save one. That is bad business.'

"The man, therefore, remained there all day and all night and all the following day, never stopping his groaning and calling, although his voice was becoming weaker and weaker.

"The second night some of our Alpines went out to release him. Our men are made of different stuff from the Germans, and their chiefs would have blushed to forbid them this imprudence. Those cries, those horrible groanings, prevented them from sleeping. Yes, we have more nerves than the Germans have—which is only another way of saying that we have more heart.

"They brought the unfortunate man to me. His abdomen had been pierced by a bullet and he had only a few more hours to live. Moreover, he had lost consciousness while being carried in. I administered an injection of caffeine and he came to. He gave me a look which I shall never forget—a look full of atrocious anguish, but at the same time of infinite gratitude. Then he said, in very pure French:

"I am going to die. But don't leave me! Don't leave me!"

"Then I understood. He was resigned to death. What he had suffered from unpeppably while he hung those forty-eight hours on the barbed wire was the idea of dying alone, absolutely alone. One can support everything but that.

"The condemned on the scaffold, criminals, at least have human beings around them—even to the last minute. If they reflected they would say to the executioner: 'My brother, I thank you for being here.' Nevertheless, I could not remain always at the bedside of this wounded man. There were others to attend to—and Frenchmen! But when I obliged him to loosen his grip on my hand his eyes protested so piteously that I made a sign to an orderly. The latter stretched out his big paw and the other clung to it.

"At last I had time to open his letter case. I learned that his name was Friedrich Weckel, from Zwickau, in Saxony, a student of Romance languages. He had also in his knapsack some letters, some photographs and a notebook, in which he had kept a sort of journal and written some verses. I was too much occupied at that moment to read all these things.

"Toward evening I administered a new injection of caffeine. He aroused himself from the torpor into which he had fallen. His tongue was thick, but he took my hand. I was about to say to him:

"Reassure yourself; I shall stay with you."

"But he protested, as if he had divined my thought:

"I know. I thank you. But do not forgive them."

"I believed that he meant the men who had shot him, our Alpines.

"They did their duty, I said to him. 'And they rescued you.'

"With a gesture he denied that he thought of them except to thank them.

"No!" he said, "the others—down there. Do not forgive them."

"What was he trying to say? I fancied I understood. 'Do not forgive those who cruelly left me there to suffer, while you, the enemy, attempted to save me.'

"But that was not all. It went further back. His grudge was more ancient and stronger. This Friedrich Weckel, of Zwickau, died in the night. The next morning I began to decipher his notebook. I found there the prose poem which follows:

Near the spring—near the spring which flows out from the grasses—in my own country, in the old beech wood, I met my well beloved. My beloved of long ago.

And she had the same smile as before. She took my hand in her hands as before, and said to me: "You love me, don't you, as you used to do?"

And I—answered: "Of what use are these eternal oaths? It is war. Do you believe that I can love always? The dead do not love. I shall be killed to-morrow. And to-morrow you will forget me."

She wept—my well beloved. Ah! how she wept! Then she asked: "If I must not love you when you are gone, whom shall I love?" For—I swear it—I could not love any one but you."

And I said to her: "It seems so to you! But, for the rest, it makes little difference. In what way can infidelity matter to the dead? All that I ask of you is not to love, but to hate. To hate those who have killed me and who have assassinated the German Fatherland—our rich, proud and peaceable Germany. But do not go to seek them where I have fallen. They are all about you."

"This is what was in the notebook of Friedrich Weckel," Marlis concluded.

"And if I tell you this story it is that you may comprehend that even eighteen months ago there lurked in Germany, in certain souls, deep bitterness and burning resentments."

CURTAIN